

## Willard Cochrane and the American Family Farm

Richard S. Kirkendal

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*Willard Cochrane and the American Family Farm*, by Richard A. Levins. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. xi, 88 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography. \$30.00 cloth.

Reviewer Richard S. Kirkendall is Bullitt Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Washington. His books include *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt* (1966).

This small book tells a big story. It is the story of the transformation of the American agricultural system during the past century. An agricultural economist at the University of Minnesota, Richard A. Levins uses the life and career of one of his senior colleagues, Willard Cochrane, as a way of telling his tale. He writes a biographical essay with hope of alerting readers to what our agricultural system has become.

Levins begins the book with a chapter on the transformation. It featured the swift decline in the number of farms and the rapid rise of giant off-farm corporations. Levins and Cochrane recognize that much of the nation's farmland continues to be owned and operated by families, but they insist that many of the farms are "family farms in form but not in spirit" (3). That is, firms such as Cargill, Pioneer, John Deere, and Monsanto—not the farmers—make the big decisions about farming, and they get the lion's share of the system's economic rewards.

Following this strong opening, the author devotes five chapters to his colleague. In the first two Levins describes how Cochrane, a person with only a decade on farms as a boy, became an agricultural economist, then discusses his emergence as a major economist and the rise of his concern about technology's impact on farming. Levins then explores Cochrane's controversial and only partly successful service from 1961 to 1964 as the top economist in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The next chapter surveys Cochrane's later years and his mounting concern about the declining farm population, his loss of confidence in traditional farm programs, and his persistent conviction that the government could serve good purposes. In the last chapter, Levins focuses on a day in 1998 when he and Cochrane traveled to an Iowa farm the latter had first visited in 1921. Cochrane's maternal grandparents had owned and operated the small place, but it had since been overwhelmed by "progress."

Although the author is close to Cochrane and admires him, he is not uncritical. He bases the book mainly on conversations with Cochrane and his friends and on his publications, unpublished papers, and correspondence. Praising him as "right on" in his "prediction that the profits of an industrialized agriculture would go to nonfarm investors, not to farmers" (8), Levins refers to Cochrane as "one of our greatest agricultural economists" (28). His publications include one of his "pro-

fession's more noteworthy articles" (36) and "a fine example of liberal thinking as applied to food policy" (71). Levins also reports that Cochrane was one of his university's "most sought-after teachers" (71).

Yet the biographer finds a few flaws, including some important ones. He suggests that Cochrane, like other economists, was slow to recognize the implications for farm policy of the rise of off-farm corporations. And he recalls thinking during the 1998 visit that his friend might have benefited from spending more time with his Iowa cousin. "She could have told him not to worry so much about economic theory and the way it so quickly dismisses matters of the heart as being irrational or emotional," the author writes. "She could have reassured him that it was enough to hate what was happening to the home farm and that he would be foolish to feel otherwise" (82).

These criticisms took me by surprise and persuaded me that the book is too small for its large topic. Although insightful, provocative, and concerned with a major theme, the book needs to give readers much more on Cochrane's thinking about family farms and their virtues and the corporate giants and their qualities. Also, Levins should define his own point of view more fully and clearly. He appears to have an alternative agricultural system in mind. It is not clear, however, what that might be.

*American Agriculture and the Problem of Monopoly: The Political Economy of Grain Belt Farming, 1953-1980*, by Jon Lauck. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. xiv, 259 pp. Tables, notes, index. \$45.00 cloth.

Reviewer Philip J. Nelson is an adjunct instructor of history at the University of Northern Iowa. The author of articles in the *Annals of Iowa* and *Agricultural History*, his dissertation was "The Elusive Balance: The Small Community in Mass Society, 1940-1960" (Iowa State University, 1996).

At first blush, *American Agriculture and the Problem of Monopoly* seems to be a standard economic history of grain belt farming since World War II. As such, it necessarily revisits the "farm crisis," looks at the problems of agribusiness concentration, and investigates the role anti-trust legislation has played in national farm policy in the past century. To this end, it succeeds, with its information-packed chapters on the meatpacking industry, the grain-trading "cartel," the National Farmers Organization (NFO), farmer cooperatives, and federal farm policy.

But author Jon Lauck also tries to do much more, and herein lies the book's seductive appeal. Lauck has attempted to write an "old-fashioned" history in which the economic state of agriculture is seen as a product of human choices and, therefore, ineluctably political in

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